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ABSTRACT

The concept of lifelong learning is surrounded by competing myths or visions that represent very different perspectives about the purposes and goals of education. In recent years, policy statements and the learning initiatives resulting from them are based on a predominantly economic rationale. They argue that globalization and technological change are widespread and permanent, and that shortages of high-level skills and inadequate education and training systems put the economic competitiveness of nations at risk. New work systems that require flexible, autonomous workers make human capital the most important resource in learning organizations, and continuous upgrading of skills is viewed as an investment in human capital. Lifelong skill development is considered primarily an individual responsibility, while the role of the state, along with employers, is to provide access to learning opportunities that individuals are free to choose. However, the human capital, economic perspective has been criticized, primarily in the United Kingdom and other European nations. Criticism is generated toward the philosophy of turning education from a public good to a private commodity, reducing individuals to their worker-producer-consumer roles, and shifting responsibility to the individual while ignoring the social nature of learning. An alternative to the human capital approach is a vision of lifelong learning based on social capital theory. In this view, lifelong learning is a public good with the goal of enriching individuals and society. In addition, there is debate about who actually participates in lifelong learning--and how it is defined. A learning society that encompasses learning for life as well as learning for work may better serve the future. (Contains 19 references.) (KC)

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by Sandra Kerka

MYTHS AND REALITIES 2000
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Lifelong Learning

A myth, in one sense, is a vision or story describing an ideal or utopian state (Wain 2000). The concept of lifelong learning is surrounded by competing myths or visions that represent very different perspectives about the purposes and goals of education. "As is the case of other desirable social objectives, there is often a perceived gap between the ideal and the reality, the theory and the practice, the promise and the performance" (Holford, Jarvis, and Griffin 1998, p. 22). This publication examines some of these myths.

Lifelong Learning: Your Money or Your Life?

The idea that learning takes place throughout life has long been espoused by the adult education field (Martin 2000). In the 1990s, policymakers around the globe seized on the concept. The European Union declared 1996 the European Year of Lifelong Learning, and a flood of policy documents has been produced by government agencies in the United Kingdom and United States (Oliver 1999; ***21st Century Skills*** 1999; U.S. Department of Labor 1999). The vision depicted in these documents is of a world transformed by a global economy and technological change, increasing access to information and altering traditional forms of knowledge production (Hake 1999). Individuals, organizations, and nations must adapt flexibly and continuously in order to compete and survive. The key to survival, it is stressed, is lifelong learning, the foundation of learning organizations, a learning society, a learning culture (Fryer et al. 1999; Hake 1999).

These influential policy statements and the initiatives resulting from them are based on a predominantly economic rationale. They argue that globalization and technological change are widespread and permanent, and they suggest that shortages of high-level skills and inadequate education and training systems put the economic competitiveness of nations at risk. New work systems that require flexible, autonomous workers make human capital the most important resource in learning organizations. Continuous upgrading of skills is viewed as an investment in human capital (Coffield 1997). Lifelong skill development is considered primarily an individual responsibility. The role of the state, in partnership with employers, is to provide access to learning opportunities among which individuals are free to choose (ibid.).

However, the human capital/economic perspective has been the subject of intensive critique, primarily in the United Kingdom and other European nations. Wain (2000) describes how "actively propagated myths can be very persuasively represented as reality to the extent that people behave toward them as though they were real" (p. 39). As Wain and others (Bagnall 2000; Baptiste 1999; Oliver 1999) observe, the human capital perspective assumes that the new global economic order is inevitable and that desirable changes are driven by market and technological forces. In this view, lifelong learning is "an inherently good thing and as such requires little, or no further justification" (Atkin 2000, p. 258). Many publications begin with these assumptions, which are criticized on the one hand for being based on values and ideology (Oliver 1999) and on the other for being accepted uncritically and without examination (Coffield 1997). The chief criticisms of the economic rationale include the following (Baptiste 1999; Coffield 1997; Hake 1999; Oliver 1999): (1) it turns education from a public good to a private commodity, reducing individuals to their worker/producer/consumer roles, including consumers of educational services; (2) it shifts responsibility to the individual and ignores the socially constructed nature of learning; (3) it overemphasizes the instrumental and vocational purposes of learning to the exclusion of others; and (4) it rewards primarily those learning activities that can show a visible and quick return.

It is true that levels of formal educational attainment and expenditures on employee training continue to increase (Livingstone 1999), some of which can be attributed directly or indirectly to policy initiatives. And the learning marketplace does increase flexibility and choice for some, but the experience of the learning organization and the opportunities it offers is quite different for workers in the new categories of "permanent core, contractual fringe, and flexible periphery" (Hake 1999, p. 84). These new forms of work have increased underemployment and job insecurity (Livingstone 1999; Oliver 1999). One in 10 workers is in a nontraditional arrangement, the majority not by choice (U.S. Department of Labor 1999). Even in companies that are considered model learning organizations, "efforts expended in learning, in being flexible...go unrewarded" (Holford, Jarvis, and Griffin 1999, p. 288).

Despite some examples to the contrary in some countries and industries, there is a gap between the demand for and supply of educated workers, between employers' claims for skill needs and their actual hiring practices (Coffield 1997). Most job growth since 1970 has been in the services sector. Although jobs in high-tech areas and those requiring higher qualifications are among the fastest growing, occupational growth rates should not be confused with the actual numbers of new jobs (Rothstein 1999). In other words, individuals are encouraged to improve their skills continuously, yet they may be competing for a limited number of high-skill jobs. The lack of skilled workers is presented as the total explanation for a much more complex situation. A "let them eat skills" approach (Coffield 1997) suggests that workers must adapt to the "inevitable" system without questioning whether the system can or should be changed.

An alternative to the human capital approach is a vision of lifelong learning based on social capital theory (Schuller 1998). In human capital theory, individuals make economically rational choices to build their "capital" by developing skills and accumulating educational qualifications; outcomes are measured in terms of income, productivity, and other economic indicators of success. In contrast, individuals' stock of social capital is built through relationships based on trust and acceptance of mutual obligations, social values and norms encourage working for the common good, and outcomes are measured in terms of social well-being (ibid.). In this view, lifelong learning is a public good with the goal of enriching individuals and society. Rather than *worklong* learning (Hunt 1999), which focuses on preparation for occupational goals, *lifelong* learning prepares individuals for a variety of life roles, including citizenship. However, strong social capital could actually hinder learning in close-knit societies where someone who acquires educational qualifications risks separation from the community (Schuller 1998).

The economic story (or myth) is not intrinsically wrong—of course there is value in developing knowledgeable workers and a healthy economy (Hunt 1999; Schuller 1998). But it is a highly selective story that limits the purposes and goals of lifelong learning. Adding social capital to the narrative, as well as recognizing individual learning goals that may have neither economic nor social benefits, makes for a broader perspective.

The Learning Divide

To complicate the picture further, not all of the policy discourse on lifelong learning focuses exclusively on an economic vision. Many policy documents express concern for social inclusion, for widening participation in learning, for equity and social justice issues (Martin 2000). Disparities in educational attainment and increased socioeconomic inequities are recognized, and the value of personal development, social learning, and active citizenship is acknowledged (Coffield 1997; Martin 2000). However, the discussion about widening access depicts a divide between participants and nonparticipants, learners and nonlearners. This issue may also be viewed in terms of competing myths.

The rhetoric about the learning society seems to be based on the belief that most adults do not participate in learning and the solution is to provide access and motivation (Tight 1998). However, there is conflicting evidence about participation. Much research consistently finds that those who have higher educational attainment participate more in lifelong learning; professional, managerial, and college-educated workers are more likely to receive employer-sponsored training (Coffield 1997; ***21st Century Skills*** 1999). But other studies have contradictory findings that reflect differences in how learning and participation are defined (Tight 1998). Does participation mean formal study resulting in degree completion? Full time? Credit or noncredit? Does informal learning count and how is it measured? The divide may not be between learners and nonlearners but between what kinds of learning are recognized and legitimized or not (ibid.).

A longitudinal study by Gorard et al. (1998) found evidence of a "learning trajectory"—a stable learning identity or pattern over the lifespan, as well as a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and participation in formal learning. They concluded that nonparticipants may not see education as appropriate or beneficial. It may be an issue of such barriers as unwillingness to incur debt, lack of time, or family responsibilities, or it may be the nature of the opportunities themselves, not a deficiency in attitude or motivation.

Often, the use of the word "learning" in policy documents narrowly means "planned, purposeful, and intended learning," not the type of learning people do all the time—the ongoing process of change and adaptation to life circumstances (Coffield 1997; Tight 1999). There are no "nonlearners," though there may be nonparticipants in formal learning activities. Learning is not merely the acquisition of information or skills but a significant change in capability or understanding (Coffield 1997).

Related to participation myths is the idea that adult learning is a voluntary activity. Learning society rhetoric, financial incentives, and employer and social pressures are resulting in a new form of compulsory learning, learning as a "life sentence," a new form of social control (Coffield 1997; Tight 1999). The implication is that "lifelong learning is a duty, a moral obligation for any responsible member of society" (Atkin 2000, p. 255).

Conclusion

Neither the human capital nor the social capital perspective tells the whole story about lifelong learning. The competing visions differ in their beliefs about the purposes of learning and they depend on one's position: educational provider, employer, policymaker, individual (Oliver 1999). There is value on both sides, but the human capital approach has predominated in practice, benefitting only some groups and restricting the vision of a learning society to one aspect of human experience—work. A more inclusive vision of lifelong learning would define it more broadly as "the capacity to learn to live a life in changing times" (Hake 1999, p. 87). In this view, learning involves the extension of human potential and is an intrinsically worthwhile endeavor (Atkin 2000). In practice this must include learning for citizenship and democratic participation as well as work and leisure (Oliver 1999). The Learning Society should be rooted in the culture of learning in families and communities as well as workplaces and marketplaces.

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